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RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2253
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7105
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6301
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1535
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0484
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3332
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000334

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2018
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ODIP](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)
SUBJECT: MFA BLASE ABOUT MEDIA ATTACKS ON EMBASSY AND
PROPOSED EXPULSION OF AMERICAN MINISTER

REF: A. ALGIERS 274
[1](#)B. ALGIERS 293
[1](#)C. ALGIERS 291
[1](#)D. ALGIERS 76
[1](#)E. ALGIERS 133

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: After a period of relative calm, government use of the press to attack Embassy activities (refs A and B) heated up again on March 15 when Arabic-language daily El Khabar featured front page headlines proclaiming that the Interior ministry had issued an order forbidding NGOs to meet with the U.S. Embassy. Since then, however, neither the editor-in-chief of El Khabar nor several of our key civil society contacts have reported receiving any official instructions to that effect. El Khabar said that the basis of the article was "a source in the Interior Ministry." We approached the MFA again on March 16, seeking an explanation for this latest salvo as well as to voice our concern over restrictions on religious freedom (septel). The MFA assured us that there was nothing "wrong" with Embassy behavior and activities, that they had no instructions for us of any kind, and that "sometimes the press acts irresponsibly" in running stories such as the Zerhouni headlines of March 15. One journalist complained to us on March 15 that the government was now not only restricting press freedom but also hiding behind a press it conveniently brands "irresponsible" to avoid taking any responsibility for its own actions. Meanwhile, two of our contacts, with whom setting up a meeting is normally a simple matter of a phone call, asked us this week to send the request as a diplomatic note, "given the current atmosphere." END SUMMARY.

MFA: NO COMPLAINTS OR EXPLANATION

[1](#)2. (C) MFA North America Director Abdellah Laouari told Pol/Econ Chief on March 16 that the Interior ministry headlines of the previous day had not changed anything since the Ambassador raised the same issue with the MFA ten days earlier (ref A). Laouari said that the MFA had no message for us, and that we were not viewed to be "misbehaving" or acting in any way out of the ordinary. Laouari said that he was aware of the official explanation requested by the Ambassador during the previous meeting, but said that he had heard nothing about any such response. P/E Chief told Laouari that we were concerned that our contacts might feel

discouraged or threatened from meeting with us and with other foreign embassies. Dismissing the press as "irresponsible," Laouari reiterated that the MFA was extremely meticulous and protocol-conscious and would be sure to contact us in writing if anything were amiss. P/E Chief responded that, while the Embassy intended to be a good guest in Algeria, allowing the press to be used in this manner was doing some harm both to our ability to operate normally and to Algeria's image abroad. Laouari promised to pass the message up within the Ministry.

GROWING PRESSURE ON CHRISTIAN MINORITIES

13. (C) P/E Chief also raised the case of Hugh Johnson, a protestant minister being pressured to leave after living in Algeria for over 40 years (septel), as well as press reports and reports from Swiss and Chilean citizens that Christian minorities are facing increasing pressure in Algeria. Laouari replied immediately that the Johnson case was a "consular issue" and nothing more. He said that Johnson had problems with his residency status in Algeria, and offered to help us speak to the relevant officials in the MFA's Directorate of Consular Affairs. P/E Chief responded that perceptions of pressure upon religious minorities, regardless of the small percentage of the population concerned, were growing in importance and becoming a significant problem (refs D and E). He warned Laouari that the issue had already appeared in the European press and would likely appear in the U.S. media as well unless the pressure reported on in the Algerian press eased. Laouari said he understood and promised to register our concern. He also raised the State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report,

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asking if we would include the Johnson case and the concern for Christian minorities in the report. P/E Chief advised him that this was a certainty, and Laouari said he understood that to be obvious.

EMBASSY, JOURNALISTS FEELING THE EFFECTS

14. (C) Adlene Meddi, a journalist with the French-language daily El Watan, discussed the matter briefly with us on March 15 as well as in his blog. In response to the suggestion that the media was to blame for its coverage, Meddi countered, "They use us and then hide behind us." He added that now was not a happy time to be an Algerian journalist. Separately, we attempted this week to arrange meetings with two working-level government contacts who normally will arrange an appointment in response to a phone call. Both asked us to send diplomatic notes to the MFA requesting the meetings, then fax them copies separately. One of the contacts said that he needed to protect himself and this was "just a formality given the current atmosphere."

COMMENT: A CRIME WITHOUT FINGERPRINTS

15. (C) Thus far, none of our contacts can confirm receiving any official written instructions from the Interior ministry, and the pressure appears to be limited to using the press to create a perception that does not exist in reality. The MFA continues to tell us that nothing is wrong, while we have stressed that a perception of waning civil liberties has been created and is gaining traction. We will continue our reporting on the pressure currently facing the Christian minority in Algeria (refs D and E; septel), and we hope that the negative effects of this press campaign we have felt thus far will be allowed to fade away. Regardless of what the MFA insists, a perception of narrowing civil liberties does exist within Algerian society and within the regional and European press -- a perception, with no fingerprints attached, that may be as powerful as written instructions signed by Interior Minister Zerhouni himself.

